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12-2006

Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town

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Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (2006). Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town. *African Studies Review*, 49 (3), 168-170. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/31

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Comments

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Benjamin F. Soares. *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005. xiv + 306 pp. Maps. Photographs. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95 paper.

Islam and the Prayer Economy is an ethnographic and historical study of Muslim society among the people of Nioro, a town in western Mali near the border with Mauritania, which the French colonial administrator Paul Marty once described as a “veritable boulevard” of Islam in the region (p. 58). Benjamin F. Soares has drawn upon extensive fieldwork in Mali and archival research in France and Dakar to produce this nuanced and smoothly written study of Muslim leadership, practice, and culture in this community from the nineteenth century to the present. He argues that in the postcolonial period Nioro has witnessed the growth of a “prayer economy” driven most powerfully by the town’s major Sufi leaders, representing the Hamawiyya and Tijaniyya orders. He explains, “The prayer economy is, in effect, an economy of religious practice in which people give gifts to certain religious leaders on a large scale in exchange for prayers and blessings” (p. 153).

The book’s title notwithstanding, discussion of the prayer economy forms only a small part of Soares’s story. It would be more accurate to describe the book, instead, as an analysis of the complex social, political, and economic mechanics of Islam in Nioro, that situates this locality within the broader frameworks of Mali, West Africa, the former French Empire, and the world. Historically Nioro served as an important center for the Saharan trade with West Africa; during the nineteenth century it served as a capital for the state formed by al-Hajj ‘Umar Tall; and during the twentieth century it was an Islamic pilgrimage center. Yet if Nioro has become “a relatively small and economically marginal town in Mali” (p. 11), it is neither somnolent nor isolated today. Soares mentions that during the early stages of his fieldwork in the 1990s, he met Nioro Muslims who had relatives in countries like France, Oman, and Thailand, or who later moved to such countries themselves. Likewise, the Islam of Nioro, as Soares presents it, has been a culture in constant motion. In this sense the town is surely representative of Mali as a whole. For while Islam has been present in the region’s trading centers for more than a millennium, Islam only became the religion of the overwhelming majority during the twentieth century.

Soares rejects an earlier model of anthropological scholarship, represented by the works of Ernest Gellner, which portrayed Muslim societies as either “traditional” or “modern”, “orthodox” or “heterodox”, and which assumed that rising levels of education and urban living would lead away from “folk” practices and towards a religion grounded in a scholarly and textual mode. Soares instead approaches Islam as a series of “interrelated practices” and examines Muslim practices vis-à-vis Sufism and what he calls the “esoteric sciences”, which include geomancy, divination, and the use of amulets. The introductory chapter provides a useful overview of these ideas in a way that combines anthropological theory and historiography vis-à-vis the study of Muslim societies.

Soares is closely attuned to the power dynamics of Muslim society in Nioro and to the construction of Islamic authority. He focuses not only on how religious leaders have sought to maintain or advance their power, but also on how leaders, along with

rank-and-file Muslims, have interpreted correct Muslim practice (e.g., in determining how and where to pray). In the early twentieth century, the French colonial rulers also played a hand in the town's Muslim politics, and the legacies of their intervention are still visible. For example, in pursuing their *politique musulmane* or "Muslim policy", the French colonial rulers tapped the members of one lineage – the Kabalanke, whom they regarded as Muslim quietists – to run Nioro's only Friday mosque. The descendants of the Kabalanke continue to run this mosque today. Meanwhile, in 1941, French rulers exiled another Muslim leader, Shaykh Hamallah, because they were worried about the large following that this man was gathering and suspected him of being subversive. However, their targeting of Hamallah only enhanced the man's prestige, to the extent that a distinct and still-flourishing Sufi order, the Hamawiyya, formed among his disciples.

When Soares lived in Nioro in the 1990s, the respective heads of the Hamawiyya and Tijaniyya were driving a prayer economy that extended well beyond Nioro to include politicians in Bamako and émigrés in France. Humble followers were sending these men gifts, attending their annual "visits" (akin to fair days), and spending a day's wages to buy one of their photographs to behold. Meanwhile, politicians in the capital were sending much grander gifts, such as Toyota Landcruisers and other high-price commodities. These Sufi leaders were amassing wealth and power, and in return, their clients expected them to confer intercessionary prayers and blessings. Yet many members of the younger generation were proving less inclined than their parents to make a formal admission into a Sufi order. Few of these youths were Muslim "reformists" (a term that Soares prefers to "Islamists") -- for indeed, reformists were thin on the ground, even if the national media (much of it controlled by Malian proponents of *laïcité* or secularism) gave them a lot of attention. Soares suggests rather that many younger Malians were participating in a national Muslim public sphere that had been growing in the postcolonial milieu.

While it is hard to say where Muslim culture in Nioro will go, and how the Muslim public sphere will develop, Sufism and the esoteric Islamic sciences show no signs of disappearing. Islam in Nioro is likely to remain internally diverse, hotly contested, and culturally rich, for as this fine book shows, its "tradition" has been vibrant and teeming with life.

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